

236hh- Desire To End Desire

By Ajahn Nyanamoli Thero

(A Summarised Transcription of a Hillside Hermitage Dhamma Talk)

"And what, monks, is the right effort? (1) There is the case where a monk generates desire, endeavors, activates persistence, upholds & exerts his intent for the sake of the non-arising of evil, unskillful qualities that have not yet arisen. (2) He generates desire, endeavors, activates persistence, upholds & exerts his intent for the sake of the abandonment of evil, unskillful qualities that have arisen. (3) He generates desire, endeavors, activates persistence, upholds & exerts his intent for the sake of the arising of skillful qualities that have not yet arisen. (4) He generates desire, endeavors, activates persistence, upholds & exerts his intent for the maintenance, non-confusion, increase, plenitude, culmination, and development of skillful qualities that have arisen: This, monks, is called right effort." - [Sn45.8](#)

Q: What is the difference between desire-*chanda* and craving-*tanha*?

Nyanamoli: The difference is that *chanda*-desire is a form of zeal, interest, and it can be either wholesome or unwholesome. If you have a desire towards sensuality, that is *kamachanda*-sensual desire, which is not a wholesome desire. So then if you want to be free from sensuality because you started to understand the dissatisfaction of it, then you can have a desire to be free from it, to be free from sensuality and sensual desire. It's still a form of desire that can make you want to practice the Dhamma. It's a desire that can eventually result in freedom from sensual desire. *Chanda* is not in itself bad, nor good, it just depends on where you direct it. It's not a question of not having desires as you begin to practice. It's really about having the desires that are directed at the development of the wholesome and the diminishing of the unwholesome.

When you are free from any desire towards sensuality and so on, you will also lose the desire towards the wholesome because that is now what you are. At that point, you don't need to have a desire to develop the wholesome once that wholesome is developed. That's how desire, directed rightly, can result in freedom from desire all together, freedom from *chanda* all together.

"Then the brahmin Uṇṇābha approached the Venerable Ānanda... and said: "For what purpose, Master Ānanda, is the holy life lived under the ascetic Gotama?"

"It is for the sake of abandoning desire, brahmin, that the holy life is lived under the Blessed One."

"But, Master Ānanda, is there a path, is there a way for the abandoning of this desire-*chanda*?"

"There is a path, brahmin, there is a way for the abandoning of this desire."

"But, Master Ānanda, what is the path, what is the way for the abandoning of this desire?"

"Here, brahmin, a bhikkhu develops the basis for potency that possesses composure due to desire-*chanda* and intentions of striving. He develops the basis for potency that possesses composure due to energy ... composure due to mind ... composure due to investigation and intentions of striving. This, brahmin, is the path, this is the way for the abandoning of this desire."

"Such being the case, Master Ānanda, the situation is never ending, there is no end. It is impossible that one can abandon desire by means of desire itself."

“Well then, brahmin, I will question you about this matter. Answer as you see fit. What do you think, brahmin, did you earlier have the desire, ‘I will go to the park,’ and after you went to the park, did the corresponding desire subside?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Did you earlier arouse energy, thinking, ‘I will go to the park,’ and after you went to the park, did the corresponding energy subside?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Did you earlier make up your mind, ‘I will go to the park,’ and after you went to the park, did the corresponding resolution subside?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Did you earlier make an investigation, ‘Shall I go to the park?’ and after you went to the park, did the corresponding investigation subside?”

“Yes, sir.”

“It is exactly the same, brahmin, with a bhikkhu who is an arahant, one whose taints are destroyed, who has lived the holy life, done what had to be done, laid down the burden, reached his own goal, utterly destroyed the fetters of existence, and is completely liberated through final knowledge. He earlier had the desire for the attainment of arahantship, and when he attained arahantship, the corresponding desire subsided. He earlier had aroused energy for the attainment of arahantship, and when he attained arahantship, the corresponding energy subsided. He earlier had made up his mind to attain arahantship, and when he attained arahantship, the corresponding resolution subsided. He earlier made an investigation for the attainment of arahantship, and when he attained arahantship, the corresponding investigation subsided.

“What do you think, brahmin, such being the case, is the situation never ending or is there an end?”

“Surely, Master Ānanda, such being the case, the situation has an end, and is not never ending. Magnificent, Master Ānanda!... From today let Master Ānanda remember me as a lay follower who has gone for refuge for life.” - [Sn51.15](#)

Abandoning unskillful desire is not a matter of choice, it's a matter of directing it towards a certain kind of behaviour, that kind being the *gradual training*, which will then remove any basis for perpetuation of unskillful desire later on.

In other words, when you become aware of your illness, you need to have a desire to be cured. That desire will make you look for a doctor, find the right medicine, and then sustain the application of the medicine on the basis of desire for health. And then once you're cured, and healed, and there is absolutely not even the slightest trace of your illness left, you will have no more desire to be cured because you're cured. However, if while you're ill and you think, “Okay, so being free from illness means having no desire to be cured, thus, I will have no desire to be cured”, that way of thinking will prevent you from curing yourself.

In the beginning, a person cannot distinguish between bad or good desire. That's why you need to start with sense restraint, as we always say. But you don't want to be trying to not have desires. You want to be trying to see where your desires are directed. And if it's a desire for physical pleasures, of the lustful kind. That's a desire you should not cultivate, that's the desire you should abandon, not welcome, not entertain, endure until it passes without acting out of it.

An *anagami*, who is free from sensual desire, is not free from *chanda*. He's free from desire towards the sense objects of pleasures. In other words, freedom from sensuality doesn't mean absence of *chanda* of any

kind, it means loss of interest and zeal for the sensual type of pleasure. Why? Because the gratification has been fully understood, the danger has been fully understood and the escape has been fully understood.

"That any brahmins or contemplatives who do not discern, as it actually is, the gratification of sensuality as gratification, the drawback of sensuality as drawback, the escape from sensuality as escape, would themselves understand sensuality or would rouse another with the truth so that, in line with what he has practiced, he would understand sensuality: That is impossible. But that any brahmins or contemplatives who discern, as it actually is, the gratification of sensuality as gratification, the drawback of sensuality as drawback, the escape from sensuality as escape, would themselves understand sensuality or would rouse another with the truth so that, in line with what he has practiced, he would understand sensuality: That is possible." - [Mn13](#)

It's not that an *anagami* or an *arahant* have no concept anymore of what physical pleasure would feel like, it's that they have no interest in it anymore on the level of the mind, intent or thought. They're absolutely free from any zeal that a person not free from sensuality would otherwise have. An untrained person who has a sensual thought, is immediately pressured to act out of that thought and pursue sensual pleasures, because there exists an inclination towards it, there is a welcoming of that prospect of pleasure, the possibility of gratification.

That inclination can only be abandoned through seeing the danger of that delighting towards sense objects. You will not have an interest in ingesting poison if you understood the deadliness of the poison. Even though the texture and taste of it hasn't changed, the pleasure hasn't changed, but your understanding now of seeing it as a poison, that has changed, and so you have absolutely no zeal towards that kind of pleasure whatsoever. You have no interest in it.

Q: A person might say, "Well, I understand that sensuality is bad. Yet, I'm still attracted."

Nm: For as long as you haven't fully understood the gratification, the danger and the escape, you will still value sensuality, which means that you should not claim that you understood sensuality. Because if you do make such a statement, that means you're contradicting yourself. If you fully understood those three aspects, there would be no *chanda* towards sensuality left, there would only be *chanda* towards renunciation, towards seclusion, towards further abandonment.

A person might think, "Yes, I understand the peril of sensuality". Okay, fine. Ask yourself the next question. "So am I free from any form of delight, welcoming, zeal, interest, curiosity even towards pleasures that come on account of objects of the senses that are provocative of lust?". "No, I don't think I'm free of that. Or I'm not sure if I'm free that..", that means you're not free of that, that means that you should not think you understood it, and that you need to make more of an effort in the direction of understanding.

Nobody denies that you will have some insight or some degree of insight into sensuality once you start restraining, but don't think that's freedom until you know, "I am free. I don't want this, this is truly something I have no interest in anymore, quite the opposite".

You might spend most of your day not having interest in sensual pursuits, but are you still liable to having interest in sensual pursuits? If so, you're not outside of the domain of sensual desire.

You always want to look at that level of *liability*, “Am I liable to become careless and interested in sensual pursuits again? Well, maybe?”. Well, there you go, you’re not free from doubt in regard to it, which means you’re not free from it.

“...Then Ānanda said to the nun:

“Sister, this body is produced by food. Relying on food, you should give up food. This body is produced by craving. Relying on craving, you should give up craving. This body is produced by conceit. Relying on conceit, you should give up conceit. This body is produced by sex. The Buddha spoke of breaking off everything to do with sex.

‘This body is produced by food. Relying on food, you should give up food.’ This is what I said, but why did I say it? Take a mendicant who reflects properly on the food that they eat: ‘Not for fun, indulgence, adornment, or decoration, but only to sustain this body, to avoid harm, and to support the holy life. In this way, I shall put an end to old discomfort and not give rise to new discomfort, and I will live blamelessly and at ease.’ After some time, relying on food, they give up food. That’s why I said what I said.

‘This body is produced by *tanha*-craving. Relying on craving, you should give up craving.’ This is what I said, but why did I say it? Take a mendicant who hears this: ‘They say that the mendicant named so-and-so has realized the undefiled freedom of mind and freedom by wisdom in this very life. And they live having realized it with their own insight due to the ending of defilements.’ They think: ‘Oh, when will I too realize the undefiled freedom of mind and freedom by wisdom in this very life. ...’ After some time, relying on craving, they give up craving. That’s why I said what I said.

‘This body is produced by conceit. Relying on conceit, you should give up conceit.’ This is what I said, but why did I say it? Take a mendicant who hears this: ‘They say that the mendicant named so-and-so has realized the undefiled freedom of mind and freedom by wisdom in this very life. And they live having realized it with their own insight due to the ending of defilements.’ They think: ‘Well, that venerable person can realize the undefiled freedom of mind and freedom by wisdom in this very life. ... Why can’t I?’ After some time, relying on conceit, they give up conceit. That’s why I said what I said.

‘This body is produced by sex. The Buddha spoke of breaking off everything to do with sex.’” - [An4.159](#)

As for *tanha*, it's subtler than *chanda*. *Tanha* is on a different level. *Chanda* is kind of an active quality that you either carelessly engage with on account of your past behaviour that hasn't been restrained, or something you can cultivate, as the Buddha would say, “ he generates desire... for the sake of the non-arising of evil, unskillful qualities that have not yet arisen...”.

You can reflect on why it's good to be cured, why it's good to make the effort towards abandoning the unwholesome and cultivating the wholesome, why it's good to practice the gradual training, why it's good to be virtuous and sense restraint, and because of those reflections you will be generating a desire to develop those practices.

Tanha is more on an immediate level of your attitude towards your present enduring feeling, whatever it is. That attitude is always rooted in *resistance*. If there is craving for pleasure, that is rooted in you resisting the current feeling, which is not necessarily unpleasant, but it's not sufficient, i.e. the pleasure, it's not sufficient, which is why you crave for more pleasure. Which means, it's painful.

Any resistance is painful, and with the mind of resistance, if you experience pleasure, you will by default be resisting it, because by default, you want more of it. With the mind not free from *tanha*, when you experience pain, by default you're resisting it, because you don't want any of it. You want it to completely go away. With the mind not free from *tanha*, when you experience a neutral feeling, you will automatically resist it, you will incline towards oblivion, towards ignoring it, towards turning away from it, because you don't understand it. *Tanha*, practically speaking, is always that resistance on the level of what you're currently feeling.

Q: Even if you're feeling pleasure, you're still resisting it. It's not good enough for you.

Nm: Absolutely. That's why if you're not free from craving, every pleasure will be underlined by craving for more. With the presence of resistance, there is the presence of dissatisfaction, presence of *tanha* means *dukkha* is there, presence of *dukkha* means *tanha* is there.

If *tanha* is still present, that means that there is still resistance to whatever feeling is there for you at the time, and that's why you suffer, not because of what is felt but because of that resistance. And why would you be resisting? Why is it that you're not content with an agreeable feeling that is present? Why is it, that by default, the mind wants more of it? It's because of the wrong view in regard to what pleasure is, what sensuality is, what gratification is. Sensuality is a form of *upadana*, an assumption, it's a view, it's basically the values that you uphold throughout your day to day existence.

Sensual desire is felt unpleasantly and that's why you want to gratify your senses, because non-gratified senses hurt. However, your resistance is the suffering there, and so if you stop resisting the non gratified senses, they'll stop hurting and there will be no suffering there despite the senses being ungratified.

You don't see that the suffering is on the level of your *resistance*. You think suffering exists because there is no gratification of the senses, and so you go out and seek gratification, and that's why you keep perpetuating your suffering.

First, you need to stop seeking out the gratification of the senses. So that your *resistance* to the non-gratified senses becomes apparent as the cause of your suffering. And then you realise, "Oh, I stop resisting. It stops hurting". Which means that gratifying the senses becomes redundant.

The habit of resistance (craving) perpetuates the sensuality view that non-gratified senses cause suffering and gratified senses means freedom from suffering.

Tanha feeds *kāmuṇāpādāna*-the assumption of sense desire, and the *kāmuṇāpādāna* feeds *tanha*, that's why it's beginningless. It's a vicious circle, it has no beginning. It's not that you were pure, then you develop *tanha*, and then you develop *upadana*. No, you start already infected, perverted, mistaken, confused, assumed. Corruption is beginningless. And that's why if you understand it, if you uproot the gratuitous assumption or the craving, both will be uprooted and cannot revert back. The uprooting is irreversible.

Ignorance:

“Bhikkhus, this is said: ‘A first point of ignorance, bhikkhus, is not seen such that before this there was no ignorance and afterward it came into being. Still, ignorance is seen to have a specific condition.

“I say, bhikkhus, that ignorance has a nutriment; it is not without nutriment. And what is the nutriment for ignorance? It should be said: the five hindrances. The five hindrances, too, I say, have a nutriment; they are not without nutriment. And what is the nutriment for the five hindrances? It should be said: the three kinds of misconduct. The three kinds of misconduct, too, I say, have a nutriment; they are not without nutriment. And what is the nutriment for the three kinds of misconduct? It should be said: non-restraint of the sense faculties. Non-restraint of the sense faculties, too, I say, has a nutriment; it is not without nutriment. And what is the nutriment for non-restraint of the sense faculties? It should be said: lack of mindfulness and clear comprehension. Lack of mindfulness and clear comprehension, too, I say, has a nutriment; it is not without nutriment. And what is the nutriment for lack of mindfulness and clear comprehension? It should be said: “attention without the right perspective”- *ayonisomanasikara*.

Ayonisomanasikara, too, I say, has a nutriment; it is not without nutriment. And what is the nutriment for *ayonisomanasikara*? It should be said: lack of faith. Lack of faith, too, I say, has a nutriment; it is not without nutriment. And what is the nutriment for lack of faith? It should be said: not hearing the good Dhamma. Not hearing the good Dhamma, too, I say, has a nutriment; it is not without nutriment. And what is the nutriment for not hearing the good Dhamma? It should be said: not associating with good people. - [An10.61](#)

Craving:

“Bhikkhus, it is said: ‘A first point of craving for existence, bhikkhus, is not seen such that before this there was no craving for existence and afterward it came into being.’ Still, craving for existence is seen to have a specific condition.

“I say, bhikkhus, that craving for existence has a nutriment; it is not without nutriment. And what is the nutriment for craving for existence? It should be said: ignorance. Ignorance, too, I say, has a nutriment; it is not without nutriment. And what is the nutriment for ignorance? It should be said: the five hindrances ... (as in 10:61) ... And what is the nutriment for not hearing the good Dhamma? It should be said: not associating with good people. - [An10.62](#)
